WATER

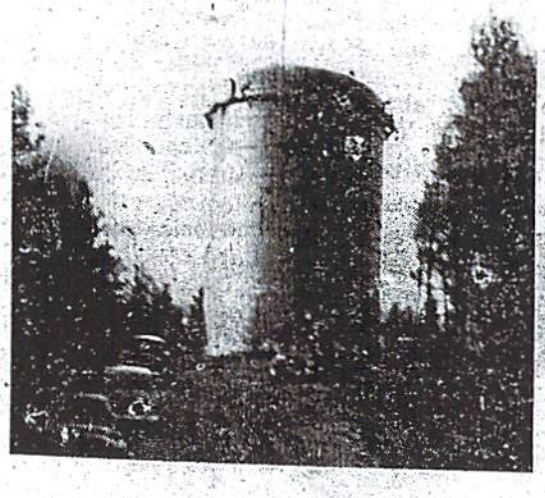
Duxbury's Water Supply

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY
(This is the second of 2 articles on Duxbury's Water supply.)

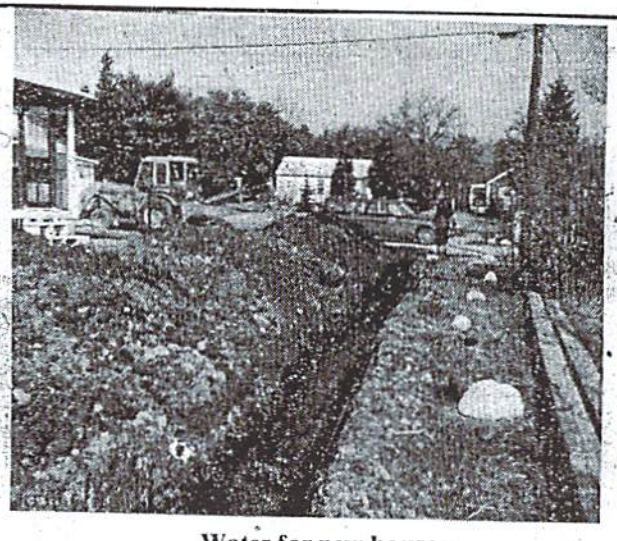
Duxbury's water supply is contained in the 9 wells dotted over the town in strategic spots and in the 2 (soon hopefully to be 3) standpipes located one on Captain's Hill, another on Birch St. in West Duxbury, and a projected one off Lincoln St. in North Duxbury.

These wells are not artesian wells as I had always believed, but "gravel packed" wells, consisting of a concrete seal 54 inches across at the top that reaches a depth of 20 feet into the ground, and a casing that is 48 inches across and goes down approximately 40-60 feet. This is surrounded by gravel blown in for the entire distance of the well's depth. The pump is electrically operated with a 6-cylinder engine running on propane gas as back-up. State law requires aquifer (soil water absorbent) of at least 400 feet surrounding the well. Most of Duxbury's aquifers are over 1,000 feet in diameter. The aquifer is monitored regularly with results going to the State Department of Environmental Quality Engineering. Fears of acid rain that have killed most of the fish in our northern lakes and ponds and of contamination from the dumping of toxic wastes and the salting of our highways in winter are so far unsubstantiated in Duxbury. No discoveries have been made yet of toxic waste dumps as in Kingston but eternal vigilance is the watch word and our water system stands among the finest in the state for its quantity, its quality, and the effeciency of its operation.

An impressive battery of electronic telemeters in the superintendent's office in the Town Offices monitors water reserve and well levels at all times. In the event of power failure propane engines take over to be certain that ample water is available. An office staff consisting of Mrs. Karlene Regina, whose tactful response to telephone inquiries is well known as is that of her assistant, Mrs. Jayne Polvere both of whom are on guard to see that the wells are functioning properly. I was driven on a pouring rainy day to 2 of these wells in operation, with their tubes of chemical input assisting the proper chemical balance in the water.



Birch St. Standpipe



Water for new house.

The working crew includes 6 men who man and monitor 90 miles of watermain and maintain 650 hydrants. The standpipe on Captain's Hill holds 2,000,000 gallons of water replacing the original one that held 325,000 gallons. The one on Birch St. holds 1,000,000 gallons as will the projected one on Lincoln St. I learned that these reservoirs were just that, reservoirs, and not the tanks to which all water is pumped before it gets into the water mains on the streets. All in all it is an impressive display of organization and dedication. I wish every citizen and taxpayer in town could have this privilege of a personally conducted tour such as I enjoyed in preparing to write this report.

But like all human achievements it was not completed without much personal sacrifice on the part of a few, and lots of hard work on the part of many. In the beginning it was really touch and go. The people of Duxbury had ample water for personal and farm use; they were understandably reluctant to take this tremendously expensive leap into the dark. The water program such as it was seemed good enough to many. The (then) Rural Society had donated 2 stone horse watering troughs to the town one at each flagpole in 1890. One can still be seen standing in the park off Washington St. on a bank of the Blue Fish River. Priscilla (Swanson) Harris recalls one on High St., and another in the vicinity of the Ashdod Fire Station. People were content, many of them with what they had, except for the few who had suffered fire losses. This fear of fire was what finally won the day, but it was a close shave despite the eloquent leadership of Harry Bradley and Frederick Knapp and my father, Hortence E. Merry.

My father took full credit for the final vote and loved to tell the story of how town meeting on March 8, 1913, authorized the selectmen to petition the legislature to allow Duxbury to set up a corporation called "The Duxbury Fire Company." Father said the idea was first received with great enthusuasm and as people got closer and saw what a vast undertaking it would be for this fledgling community, many got cold feet. Father and the young activists in town had lobbied every corner: barbershops, post offices, boarding houses, inns (of which there were many on Washington St.). All had sponsored hearings and many commitments had been received, enough for an overwhelming vote. But when the vote was called father looked around from his seat on the front row (he loved to sit in the front row to deal with just such contingencies) and saw many of his "fair-weather" supporters hanging back, he called for a standing vote. He stood and put the evil eye on anyone within range, and the issue was won. The final vote was 41 to 46. The report of that town meeting notes that it was a "rising vote." I don't suppose it was the first time an important decision was made by a skillful parliamentary maneuver, nor will it be the last!

Almost every oldtimer in Duxbury remembers the thrill and excitement that greeted the establishment of the town water system. As children we played "King of the Castle" on the piles of earth from the ditches and despite family warnings leaned over the ditches' edges to see the fresh shiny black water mains. Mildred (Tammett) Glass remembers one of her teenage friends, Lillian Bartlett, stumbling and falling and losing her life under the wheels of a passing automobile. Walter Prince recalls selling tomatoes from his father's vegetable wagon on his daily route through the town. The Italian workmen sliced the tomatoes to make sandwiches with their long loaves of bread. Bartlett Bradley was enthralled by the steam roller that was used to pack down the surface of the ditches after they had been filled in. (This roller had been an issue in more than one town meeting -- but was finally bought by an appropriation of $3,650 at the meeting held on March 7, 1913. The minutes read "for a steam roller and a building to house the same.") My own most vivid recallections were the furious pace with which the Italians (we called them "EYE-talians) worked and it was the first time I had heard a foreign language. Donald Walker remembers the gala banquet his father attended that was held at the "Colonial Inn" to celebrate the completion of the task. Roy Peterson was water superintendent for many years as the system grew.

The above picture (of Duxbury's first water department) was on the cover of a program: "Banquet in honor of the first Water Commissioners of Duxbury, Mass., held at the Colonial Inn, Duxbury, Mass. on Saturday evening, Dec. 19, 1914. (Now the home of Dr. and Mrs. Edwin Leonard on Washington St.). Guests were Percy Walker, Charles Clark and Ernest Wadsworth and hosts were: Fisher Ames Jr., Charles Alden, Arthur Bailey, Arthur Bradlee, Harry Bradley, Henry Bills, Henry Briggs, Frank Barrett, Ralph Bearce, William Burke, Charles Crocker, Gershom Chandler, John Chandler, Julius Chandler, Rev. H. Cunningham, Harold Cunningham, Harry Cushing, Dr. Samuel Durgin, William Facey, George Green, Charles Grueby, Stephen Gifford, Rev. Andrew Hahn, Harold Hanigan, Waldo Kennard, Edwin Loring, Dr. Byron Leavitt, Henry Moulton Jr., Hortense Merry, Thomas Murray, Dr. Nathaniel Noyes, Lester Osborne, Elisha Peterson, Herbert Peterson, LeRoy Peterson, Paul Peterson, Dr. Roger Spalding, Sidney Soule, Eden Soule, Charles Shirley, George Stearns, Horace Soule, Arthur Train, Rev. Lewis Thomas, Herbert Walker and Alpheus Walker. On the menu were: radishes, olives, celery, blue points on half shell, consomme, saltines, boiled salmon, egg sauce, green peas, roast young turkey, cranberry sauce, banana fritters, wine sauce, griddled sweet potatoes, mashed white potatoes, squash, creamed onions, lobster salad, Colonial Inn rolls, apple pie, mince pie, frozen pudding, assorted cake, roqueford (sic) cheese, toasted crackers, tea, town water, coffee, cigars and cigarettes. Clarke's orchestra provided the music.

The system was anchored in a pumping station of what is now 3A at the base of Millbrook. Several tests of wells in town had showed this to be the most voluminous accessibility to water and the purest. The pumps were activated by 2 enormous piston engines with gigantic flywheels. I remember them well. I also remember the exhaust pits that used to muffle their explosions a few yard away from the building. This station has now been rendered obsolete by the 9 pumps all over the town. It is to be noted that town water has been extended into more and more areas of the town, always building on the original system whose sketch was attached to an earlier article. Regrettable some streets still do not have town water and citizens must supply their own under the protective guidance of the board of health in Duxbury. No figures are so far obtainable on the number, but one question raised itself in my mind: "What about

ground pollution in family wells from septic tanks?'' Is there a danger here as we grow larger as a community and domesticate more and more of woodlands we need so much for our quality of life?

One answer is the zoning requirement that every domicile have an acre of ground around it. Another is the general regulation that seepage is not a danger if there is at least 100 feet of distance from well to tank. Besides all this, the leeching field is an excellent filtration plant itself as it purifies the water that is then turned back into the soil. The monring TV carried a story of a family in Denver, colorado, who had initiated a recycling system in their house that makes them completely independent of any water other than the 1,500-gallon tank supply with which they set up the system. Are we all heading in this direction?

The initial cost of $15,000 to begin the program will deter many, but this self-sufficient water supply reminded me of the current agitation about our ''water shortage.'' I put that in quotes because I wonder that we can really have a ''water shortage.'' Mr. Carpinetti reminded me that the use of water has multiplied since early times because it is so ''easy'' (''Easy'' with all this work and expense?) to get water. All you have to do is turn the faucet. I know some people who ''hang in'' the shower for 15 or 20 minutes when 5 will do. In earlier times water had to be hauled or pumped and it was appreciated; a tin tub on the kitchen floor and an assembly line of kids, with the cleanest in first and the dirtiest last -- well, things have changed. But does that mean that there is a real water shortage? Boston is reported to lose 25,000,000 gallons of water a year through leaks in thier system -- Duxbury loses 1,000 gallons a day through waste (running the shower too long -- leaving faucets running, etc.).

I believe it was Paramount Pictures that put on a TV documentary called ''Water'' showing where it comes from and where it goes and indicating desperate efforts that were being undertaken to avoid a showdown such as the country is facing now. I remember the picture of desalinization plants that were drawing water from the ocean. It was a compelling presentation and won an Academy Award.

The last section of the film was given over to a brief lecture by a man from the World Health Organization. He emphasized that conservation of water was a ''must'' for the peoples of the world if the human race was to survive. In between the lines of what he was saying I discerned the fact that there is a shortage of water, as it is now used by human beings. The key factor in the situation is the human element. To be sure there is a population problem; there is a problem with air pollution and the gradual elimination of our great forest watersheds through the clearing of our land, and principally through our attention to the arms race that is overlooking some of these more basic problems. But the real shortage is the shortage of human concern for one another. This is to my mind the real ''water shortage.'' It is not in the quantity of water -- it is our mishandling, our waste, our greed.

I have detected a great concern on the part of many about our water problem, and this question of ''Just how can there be a water shortage?'' is felt not in the words people use but in their basic attitude toward the problem. There comes across to me the feeling that there is something basically wrong with the management of the universe -- a feeling of betrayal like believing your parents don't love you any more. ''Maybe the universe is not really friendly after all.'' Is this why Genesis gives us the report that water was ''there'' when God made the world (of Genesis, Chapter 1) No, I feel the basic problem is the human factor -- people are more concerned with their own satisfactions than the welfare of others. The shortage is in human intent, and when more and more of us become aware of this we can take the necessary steps. To paraphrase Cassius in Shakespere's ''Julius Caesar, ''The fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves'' -- that we are short of water.''